LIFE ON THE STANFORD FARM IN THE EARLY 1920's

Clyde O. Davis

I was a 13 year old boy when I came to live on the Stanford farm and in the Stanford house in March, 1923. The farm was being run by Earnest Dickinson and the house by his very friendly and capable wife Mary. My mother died in the flu epidemic of 1918 and Earn and Mary took me in, helping both me and my overworked, underfunded paternal grandparents who had given me a home for 5 years after mother died. I lived with the Dickinson's in Stanford Manor until the start of my senior year of high school.

My recollections of my years on the farm would be unreliable after 65 to 68 years were it not for the fact that I kept a detailed diary/journal for the entire year 1925. Fortunately I still have the diary and am now able to check my memories againstwhat it says.

I was the hired boy, paid in room and board (and home haircuts and laundry etc.) and occasional money. I had access to the kitchen, my bedroom and sometimes the living room but was not part of the family social life. But I was very well treated.

The farm was diversified, meaning it produced lots of different crops and farm products. Something was going to market almost every week. There was milk from a small herd of 10 or so dairy cows, eggs from a small flock of hens, Maple syrup in the early spring from the "Sugar Bush", fresh vegetables (sweet corn, string beans, tomatoes, limas, beets, peas etc.) in the summer, potatoes, onions, pumpkins, squash etc in the late summer or early autumn, half grown pigs, or shoats, in the fall, timber in the winter, and an occasional bit from the stud services of our big Yorkshire Boar, Johnny.

Milk went to market every day in milk cans, hauled from the farm to the B.&O. station in Boston Mills and picked up by the morning "milk" train. Empty cans were returned by train. Earn got $2.10 per 100 lbs. for whole milk in 1925.

Milk was of course saved for household use and some put through an old hand driven DeLaval cream separator to provide cream for making butter. The skim milk was used for making cottage cheese.

Vegetables went to market by horse and wagon,

leaving the farm around midnight and reaching the Akron Farm market by opening time, or to market by truck when the weather and roads were good enough.

Each day, including Sunday, started at 5:30 a.m., with me doing various chores. The pigs and chickens had to be fed, the horse stalls cleaned and new bedding tossed in, the horses fed with hay from the haymow, the cow barn cleaned and the cows fed. I didn't do it all but I managed to keep very busy.I also helped to keep the woodbox filled by Aunt Mary's wood burning cook stove, and churned butter frequently.

Between them the kitchen stove and the furnace consumed a lot of firewood. Trees had to be felled about a year before use to allow the wood to dry out some. A big circular saw driven by a gasoline engine was used to saw logs into stove length chunks, and these were hand split to stove wood. Earn also built a gasoline engine driven reciprocating saw that had the back and forth motion of a crosscut saw. Sawing firewood continued intermittently from October until May. The wood shed near the kitchen had to be kept full at all times.

The lawn was large and seemed always to need mowing. In addition to the large lawn in front of the house there was lawn on both sides of the driveway running from house to barn. There must have been at least an acre altogether. Aunt Mary's large flower garden was between the house and barn on the east side. The kitchen garden was north of the chicken house. It was large and very productive.

Breakfast followed morning chores and was always a meal of great merit, a real tour de force. There was an enormous platter of sunny-side-up fried eggs, or scrambled eggs if desired, a heaping plateful of buttermilk pancakes, with maple syrup, sausage patties or pork chops, bacon,ham, homemade bread, butter and jam, fried potatoes and some kind of fruit pie. There was fresh milk, buttermilk, and coffee to drink. Nearly everything we ate was produced on the farm. We sat down about 7 A.M. and I was away by 8 A.M. during the school months, walking three miles to the old high school in Peninsula, across the road from the old G.A.R. hall.

Memories of dinner and supper are less clear than my memories of breakfast. Soup, hot biscuits, cold milk and vegetables were plentiful, and we often had chicken, roasted,

boiled etc. for supper. Roast beef was a supper staple..

Chores also had to be done at night, before supper, so as soon as I was home from school I was gathering eggs, feeding chickens and animals, or helping in the barn. Sometimes I helped with the milking which we did by hand.

We grew big 12 to 18 inch long beets of high sugar content called Mangel Wurtzels which we cut up and cooked in a big open vat, along with middlings and bran, for pig feed.

Saturdays and all summer long there was work to be done in the fields, plowing, harrowing and planting in the spring, hoeing and pulling weeds in the summer, harvesting in the fall. Wheat and oats were cut with a harvester that tied the stalks into bundles which we stacked in small stacks in the fields. Then in the fall a threshing rig, pulled along the dirt roads by a big wide-wheeled steam engine which also powered the threshing machine by means of a long leather belt, threshed the grain away from the straw and chaff. We delivered the bags of grain to the water powered grist mill in Peninsula, or else to a buyer in Akron. The straw served as bedding for the cows and horses, and bran and middlings from the grist mill helped to feed the pigs. Some of the straw was baled and sold. Earn had his own baler for baling hay and straw.

Hay we loaded onto a hay wagon with pitckforks and hauled to the barn, dozens of loads during the summer. A load was occasionally sold and delivered to the buyer.

In 1925 nearly 300 bushels of potatoes were dug, and most of them sold for $2.40 a bushel. Some 400 dozen ears of sweetcorn went to market.. The oat harvest was 1007 bushels and the wheat 388 bushels. The wheat was sold for $1.53 per bushel.

The fields between the canal and the river were usually planted with wheat or oats. Earn Dickinson's farm down the road north of the Stanford farm was mostly in alfalfa which was cut three times each summer, allowed to dry on the ground, raked into windrows and then baled. The field across the road from the house was planted to sweet corn and yellow globe onions. The field behind the barn to the creek was corn. The field north of the house next to the Mackey farm Was either sweet corn or potatoes.

Starting at the rear of the house and going clockwise,

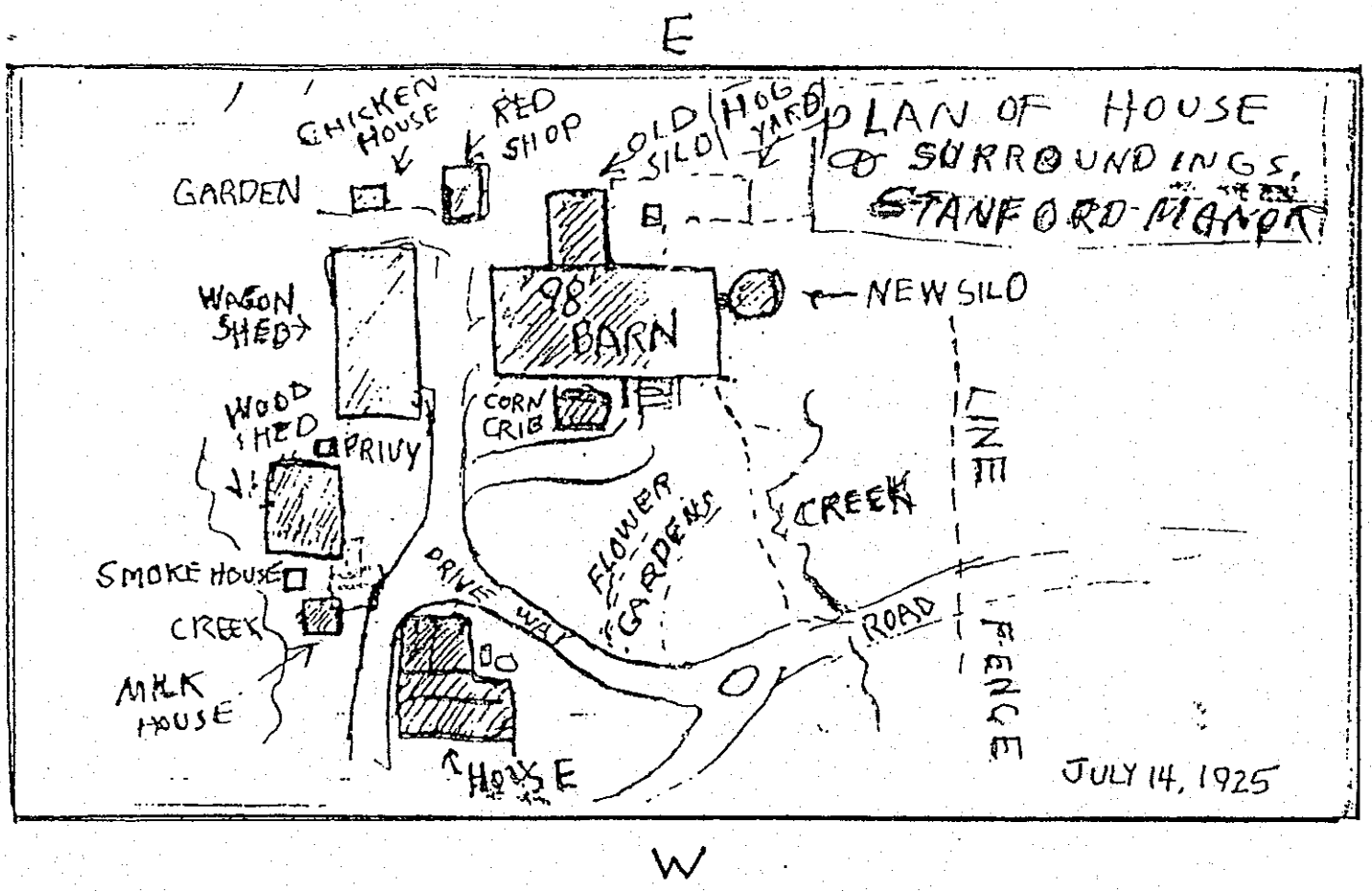
the first building, down over the bank, was the milk house or spring house. Next was the smoke house, then a large woodshed and close beside it an outhouse or outdoor John. A long wagon shed was about 30 feet north of the barn, closed at the back with its open end facing the barn. Beyond the wagon shed was the henhouse and under the shed was where Johnny the Boar lived. At the end of the driveway running from house to barn was the Red Shop, the old farm blacksmith shop. On the east side of the barn was a big square-sided attachment to the barn that was used as a silo. While I was there it became a straw storage barn. The new silo was at the south end of the barn and the corncrib on the west side..The pig pen was at the southeast end of the barn.

The farm outhouse was a constant reminder of the austerity and sometimes harshness of farm life in the 1920's.

The Red Shop was a fascinating place, like a museum. A flintlock or two and powder horns hung on the walls, along with various tools from colonial days. I recall a cradle for harvesting grain. It was a big scythe with several curved wooden arms parallel to and above the blade, to catch the cut stalks of grain. On the benches were wooden-bodied planes, drawshaves, augers etc.

There was a great deal of hand work in those days. Corn was planted with a hand planter, and the corn stocks were cut by hand in the fall and put into corn shocks which were pulled apart in the winter and the ears of corn husked. Corn for ensilage, however, was cut with a corn harvester and hauled in wagons to the silo at the barn. An ensilage grinder chewed the stalks into small pieces and blew them up a stack into the top of the silo and they fell to the bottom.. There the chewed up stalks and bits of corn fermented and provided good cow food all winter.

Talk of the ensilage grinder reminds me of one aspect of farm life in the 20's that we did not dare forget and that was the danger of injury and death. Many a hand was sliced off by ensilage grinders. Tractors were another hazard. I once drove Earn's Fordson tractor pulling a couple of plows when the front wheels seldom touched the ground. The hitch to the plows was too far to the rear on the underside of the tractor and the pull of the plows was strong enough to cause the big rear wheels to



STANFORD FARM BUILDINGS IN 1925

THIS DIAGRAM WAS PHOTOCOPIED FROM A PAGE IN THE 1925 DIARY OF CLYDE DAVIS

lift the whole front end of the tractor a few inches. I could steer because one front wheel was down in a furrow which really did the steering. Many a farmer has been crushed by a tractor that heaved its front end up and fell over backwards on the driver. This might have been my fate if the plows had hit a big rock or a thick root. Another problem with tractors was that many of them did not have brakes. If you were careless enough to try to shift gears going up hill you could suddenly feel the tractor moving rapidly backwards down hill. Your only recourse was to abandon ship..

One of my closest shaves occurred when we were unloading hay from a haywagon and lifting big swatches of it with a harpoon hay fork. I was on the top of the load, sticking the harpoon into the hay as far as possible, and then releasing the prongs that extended out to hold the hay onto the harpoon. The harpoon and swatch of hay was then pulled straight up by means of a rope and pulleys with a horse pulling the rope. The harpoon engaged a little car on a track hanging from the ridgepole of the barn. The car and load moved into the barn.. At a signal from the haymow I pulled on a rope that released the hay and pulled the car back, and a trip mechanism at the end of the track released the harpoon and let it ride down on ropes and pulleys. On one occasion I pulled the car and harpoon back and when the car hit the stop, the stop came loose and car, harpoon and all came directly down towards me. I still have no idea how I escaped being killed. I remember seeing the thing coming down at me but do not know how it missed me.

Another bad scare I had was caused by Johnny, the Boar. He was over three feet tall at the shoulder and 7 or 8 feet long. His head was massive and his jaws long and narrow. He was old, ugly and mean. When we finally butchered him the meat was so tough that even the sausage was unchewable.. Once when I was gathering eggs under the wagon shed where Johnny bedded down he got me cornered so I had to go past him in order to escape. He came at me snorting and with his mouth open and was on me before I found a small stick that I could whack him with on the end of his nose. That got his attention and he began to back up. I got a bigger stick and finally discouraged him. Gathering eggs under the wagon shed was never any fun after that.

Aunt Mary Dickinson baked twice a week. Her big cook stove was against the wall opposite the back door. A pitcher (hand) pump at the sink on the south side of the kitchen drew water from a spring or well in the basement. A pantry/buttery was also at the south end of the kitchen. There the pots and pans and supplies were mostly kept. Her baking was a major activity. She baked bread, pies, cakes, muffins, cookies etc. enough to feed the 6 or 8 people who were usually on hand. Aunt Mary cooked regularly for a houseful of people using mostly food raised or prepared on the farm.

Mary saved fat and grease from the kitchen, and ashes were saved from the wood-burning furnace in the basement. The ashes contained alkali which she leached out by pouring water over them and catching the liquid that drained out the bottom of the ash container. This liquid and the kitchen fat was cooked together in a big cast iron pot, and a yellowish laundry soap resulted. It was poured onto a large pan where it became firm and was then cut into cakes.

A similar operation involving a large kettle set over an outdoor wood fire served for making apple butter. In this case the kettle was loaded with cut up apples, apple cider and various spices. It took a long, slow cook with continuous stirring. I seem to remember a wooden paddle with an arm attached to a rocking chair so that one could knit or darn or read while rocking and moving the paddle back and forth.

I do not recall an apple orchard on the farm but there were always plenty of apples from somewhere every fall, and usually some barrels of cider. At least one barrel was allowed to ferment to form hard cider which was drinkable most of the winter. If the weather got cold enough to freeze most of the liquid in a barrel of hard cider the liquid near the center of the barrel became very high in alcohol content and noticeably intoxicating.. Another barrel or two of cider became the year's supply of vinegar.

Maple syrup time in late winter was exciting. Late February or early March, depending on the weather, we tapped the sugar maple trees in the woods east of the house across the creek. A hole about 5/8 inches in diameter was drilled for a couple of inches into a tree 18 inches to three feet above ground. A tapered, hollow steel tube called a spile was driven

into the hole. The spile was open at the small end, inside the tree, so the maple sap could get in, and the outer end was open so the sap could drip into a bucket hung on the spile. Every morning the rounds of all the tapped trees was made in a wooden sled on which a big galvanized tank was carried. A team of horses pulled the sled. The sled was favored over a wagon because the ground was either muddy, frozen or snow covered. Also the tank was more accessible on a low sled. The sap was drained from the collecting tank into a big storage tank at the sugar house.. There the sap was allowed to flow slowly into one corner of the big flat evaporating pan. The pan had a full length baffle down the middle and several transverse compartments with openings at alternate ends so the sap flowed from one side to the other. A wood fire under the pan boiled the water out of the sap as it flowed back and forth from one compartment to the next and down one side of the pan and back the next.. By the last compartment the sap was maple syrup.The sugar content was measured by running specific gravities on the liquid in the final compartment. When it reached about 11 pounds per gallon it was dipped out, poured through an elongated felt strainer and canned up in gallon cans. In a good year about 100 to 120 gallons were produced. I do not recall how much Earn got per gallon.

Sap collecting and syrup making continued until little white moths began to collect aound the tapped trees. That meant that the sap would soon lose its sweetness but I never knew why.

The house was lighted at night by coal oil (kerosene) lamps when I first went there to live. Later Earn Dickinson bought a considerable number of excess World War 1 submarine lead storage batteries. He placed them in the basement of the house, installed a gasoline engine that ran a direct current generator, and he had a direct current electrical system. He tried to instal electrical wiring in the house but the old beams (many of black walnut) were so hard that the drills we had would not penetrate them. Wiring therefore had to be exposed.

. The lead storage battery system is potentially very hazardous because the cells generate hydrogen while they are being recharged. Hydrogen-air mixtures are highly explosive. But the batteries supplied a steady flow of electricity to lamps throughout the house and when the battery voltage dropped the

gasoline engine started automatically and powered the generator that recharged the batteries. Public Utility electrification did not come to the valley until the early 30's.

In the winter when there was no work to be done in the fields we repaired harnesses for the horses, did repairs to fences and farm buildings and equipment. Late fall and winter was also when pigs and sometimes a young bull calf were butchered. Pork hams, shoulders, and bacon were hung in the smoke house and smoked for several days in hickory smoke until they were a deep brown color. Earn also tried smoking salmon and turkey meat. The smoked meat was hung in Aunt Mary's pantry.

There was never any lack of work on the farm but there was nevertheless some time for play. Two Stanford boys lived up on the hill south of the farm and I spent a lot of time with them. Clayton was a little older and Morton a little younger than I was. We swam in a water-filled stone quarry at Peninsula, drove to Akron in the Stanford car to watch professional wrestling, wrestled some ourselves, etc. We also worked together, helping each other with farm work, especially at harvest time.

Morton and I one summer decided that a grass covered mound on top of a hill south of the road to Brandywine Falls was probably another of the many mounds erected in Ohio by the ancient mound builders. We asked his uncle Orlando about it and as I recall it, he agreed. So we decided to excavate and find out what if anything those ancient people buried in their mounds. We set up an "A" frame, got a pulley system and bucket and began hoisting bucketfuls of dirt out of a hole that was soon dangerously deep. However, before being buried by a cave-in we found an important artifact about ten feet into the dig. It was a beer bottle and on the bottom it said St. Louis. So we stopped digging. We later found that a barn had once stood on the site and the mound was the approach up to the haymow. So much for boyhood archaeology.

On the west side of the road 200 yards north of the house was a very large old very hollow Sycamore tree and in it for as long as anyone could remember barn owls had lived. There were dozens of them. It was fun on a summer evening to sit near the tree and watch the owls come and go and hear the racket

they made inside the tree.

The roads in the valley in the 1920's were all dirt roads, many only one lane. Cars and trucks were scarce. Horses and buggies or wagons were the usual traffic, and not much ot that. There was of course no radio or TV although station KDKA in Pittsburg began radio broadcasting about 1921 and by the time I came to the farm many kids were building crystal sets with which to receive radio broadcasts and several stations in our area were broadcasting. An empty rolled oats container, a spool of wire, a tourmaline crystal, a wire "cat's whisker" was about all it took to make a radio.

Life on the Stanford farm in the early 1920's was so different from life anywhere now that people who did not experience it will have difficulty imagining it. The work was hard and continuous but the food was good and plentiful, the companionship was first rate (people talked a lot more then, before TV, radio etc.) sleep was easy and restful.

My room, which is now gone, was at the top of the back stairs above the kitchen, across from the storage attic that was above the kitchen. I think I earned my keep, and my years on the farm were good for me. I learned self reliance and to be pretty uncomfortable unless I have tasks waiting to be done. But I also know how to relax between jobs.

The year 1925 was an eventful one for the farm. In spite of too much rain, and both late and early frosts, crops were pretty good. These occurrences also happened that year:

(1) On february first Earn Dickinson and other normally nonchurch-goers attended the Methodist Church in Boston Mills.

(2) On February sixth a much advertised second coming of Christ failed to happen. Earn and the others deserved credit for being cautious because they did not know that this was the grandaddy of all erroneous predictions. Starting with the apostle Paul about 50 A.D. this prediction has been wrong at least 100 times.

(3) On February 28 an earthquake occurred at 9:23 P.M. I was alone in the house and was frightened by the shaking, creaking and thumping upstairs, the swaying of chandliers and the movement of furniture. I have since experienced the San Francisco earthquake of 1989 and believe the 1925 Ohio quake

felt much the same.

(3) Chief Justice William Howard Taft administered the oath of office to President Calvin Coolidge, the first ever radio broadcast of a Presidential inauguration.

(4) Earnest Dickinson, son of Earn and Mary, got his degree in Veterinary Medicine at Ohio State University in June and later joined a Veterinary Medicine practice in Akron Ohio.

(5) Residents of the valley formed many Indignation Committees during the summer in preparation for demanding that the city of Akron stop using the Cuyahoga River as a sewer. The smell of the River was awful all summer.

(6) On August third the funeral for Mrs. George Stanford, grandmother of Clayton and Morton, was held in the house. Mrs. Stanford had lived there most of her life since about 1840.The pall bearers were leading citizens Earn Dickinson, Russel Jaite, Rollin Boody, Charles Eisenman and Ray McChesney.